



OUR SHORT STORY PAGE



Mr. BOBBY'S SAVING CLIMAX

By Aileen Cleveland Higgins

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THIS soup looks like a boiled mudpuddle—I will not eat it," megaphoned Mrs. Wickliff-Ames to the new waitress, who was standing so far distant as one foot and a half from her elbow.

The other members of the Divorce Colony who were seated at their Round Table, breezily stirring the dining-room atmosphere of the Hotel Riverside, at Reno, Nevada, with their exchange of bespangled gossip, paused an instant and stared philosophically at their own soup-plates.

"If you will learn to eat your soup as a part of the programme of your getting your D. L. it will make it easier," soothed Mrs. Trent, a frail, resigned-looking woman who was getting her divorce upon grounds of extreme cruelty, because her husband objected to her playing bridge.

"My D. L.?" Mrs. Wickliff-Ames lifted an interrogating eyebrow.

"Your decree of liberty. You will soon learn our parlance," sang out Mr. Bobby Stanton to the tyro. "Just think, I get mine tomorrow."

Mr. Bobby looked smilingly about the Round Table and complacently received the murmurs of congratulation.

"Tomorrow!" enviously sighed Mrs. Ripley, who had been in residence only three months. She reached under the table for a sympathetic clasp of Mrs. Trent's hand. There was a bond between them, because Mrs. Ripley was also getting her decree upon the extreme cruelty charge—her husband would not allow her to use any artistic facial embellishments.

"How do you feel, Mr. Bobby?" queried Captain Willoughby, looking up from his nervous perusal of mining stock quotations in the *Reno Herald*.

"How do I feel?" said Mr. Bobby slowly. "Well, to tell you the truth, my friends, somewhat like a paged animal that's let loose and doesn't know what to do with his freedom."

"Oh, I can't imagine it's being like that," purred Mrs. Ripley, with a finished uplifted glance at the artist, Mr. Pecinovsky.

"Nor I," emphatically agreed Mr. Pecinovsky, whose period of waiting for his decree had been spent in making water-color studies of Mrs. Ripley's golden head and planning new bonds.

"You wish me to bring you another kind of soup, madam?"

The waitress' low voice recalled Mrs. Wickliff-Ames to the ordeal of eating.

"Yes—get me something else—anything," she answered, waving away the menu-card wearily—"anything that doesn't look like this—"

More than one of the Divorce Colony looked after the waitress as she walked out of the dining-room carrying the rejected soup like a goddess uplifting an offering.

"She is certainly good-looking for a waitress," exclaimed Mrs. Trent, speaking in a tone somewhat resentful, as if the waitress with the beauty of her Greuze face had infringed upon Divorce Colony rights, which were imperially exclusive.

"A waitress?" cried Mrs. Ripley, suddenly leaning forward with narrowing eyes as the last flutter of the little white apron disappeared. "Waitress? I'll wager she's never carried a tray before in her life. She certainly has an amateurish way with it. Did you notice what aristocratic-looking hands she has? And what an air of distinction in her bearing?"

"I was just noticing myself—and did you notice her hair? It's like burnished copper. She puts Botticelli's Simonetta out of running," remarked Mr. Pecinovsky, taking his appreciative eyes for the fraction of a moment from Mrs. Ripley's masterfully pencilled eyebrows.

"I believe she belongs to the Divorce Colony," broke in Mrs. Trent, breathlessly. "Doubtless her brutal husband will not pay her expenses, so she has to work to stay in residence."

"Maybe he thinks he can starve her back," suggested Mrs. Ripley with dramatic force.

"Perhaps here is an M. A. case too," murmured Mrs. Farrington-Wentworth, burrowing languidly into the conversation.

"M. A. case?" questioned Mrs. Wickliff-Ames, irritated again by her ignorance.

"Mental anguish case," Mrs. Farrington-Wentworth informed her quickly. Her own husband had caused her mental anguish by his stubborn preference for purple ties and red wall-paper.

"She certainly has a look of having nedured," commented Mrs. Wickliff-Ames, decisively, her own expression growing more marked.

"She has, indeed," was the universal cry from all the women at the Round Table.

Captain Willoughby put down his paper with finality and helped tessellate the fascinating story. When the new waitress appeared she held the veiled attention of every one—Mr. Bobby not excepted, though he appeared to be lost in abstracted thought.

"Forget about your next plot, Mr. Bobby, and rouse yourself to notice her," said Mrs. Trent, as the new waitress bore away the fish-plates.

Notice? Mr. Bobby smiled commiseratingly upon them! They had just discovered this charming mysterious person? Had he not noticed her from the moment she had begun her service in the dining-room, two days before, at the Broker's Table? Had his pulse not quickened with interest when he had come to dinner that evening and found that she had been transferred to the Round Table?

"Yes, tell us what you think, Mr. Bobby," urged Captain Willoughby. "You can always weave such interesting stories about people."

Mr. Bobby's brave persistent optimism struggled buoyantly to assert itself. Almost he allowed himself a fine burst of artistic speculation. Then suddenly the memory of past disillusionments stirred actively, and like a pall it settled smotheringly upon the little flicker of his glowing fancy. His ingenious contribution to the dramatic mosaic in hand died upon his lips.

"I think," he said, with his most cynical intonation—"I think that it is idiotic to romance like this about people. One is only led up to a false climax—it's like dancing one's self breathless at a *bal masque* in attendance upon some queenly personage, only to behold at the dramatic moment of unmasking the grinning moon-face of your club partner at whist."

"Yes, or like following up a trail of blood and finding a dead rooster," said Captain Willoughby, recalling a rankling boyhood experience which had jarred his spirit of adventure.

"Exactly," went on Mr. Bobby. "I'm tired of these surprise stories people always lead up to—they never give a satisfying climax. No, no—it doesn't pay to court deliberately an April-fooled sensation—to disappoint one's fancy like that."

"Oh, come now, Mr. Bobby, what would the Round Table do without its chief diversion?" cried Mrs. Ripley. "I'm sure you have some pretty guess about the new arrival. Do tell us."

"No, you must do your romancing without me to-night," answered Mr. Bobby, rising abruptly and excusing himself. "I'm packing, you know."

The members of the Round Table called after him reproachfully, but Mr. Bobby only looked back with a wave of gay obdurance, and swung the green doors quickly behind him.

He locked himself in his rooms and set to work to pack in a desultory, indeterminate fashion. Packing to go—where? He questioned himself whimsically. Where did he want to go? He picked up a map and ran his finger over the few places which he had not explored.

"I will go where there are no people," he concluded, his finger upon the black dots which indicated a mountain wilderness.

Mr. Bobby threw down the map and took a restless turn about the room.

"I don't want people," he repeated, trying to convince himself of what, way down deep in his heart, he knew was not true.

He caught up a hand-tooled book and turned its pages with a mixture of affection and impatience.

"Beautiful artistic lies," he cried, hotly. "There's nothing in life like you. Life's made up of false climaxes. A man's a fool to look to hope for anything else—and that's what I've been—always looking, always believing that somewhere, sometime, something would happen which would show me life's not the farcical jumble it seems. But oh, if only I could know an artistic climax outside of the pages of a book! If something like that would only happen—something beautiful in its entirety as a pink-skinned pearl—then even a dusty bit of torn brown paper would have poetry about it—then the great weight which makes my pen drag would drop from it—then, then I could write! I want the real—oh, how I want it! When a man's illusions are gone—when he can no longer live contentedly in his own world of fancy—when there's nothing in the every-day—nothing in the lives of people he touches elbows with to make him say that for him life is good—then happiness is a minus quality—a man may as well die."

Some letters fell to the floor, and Mr. Bobby scrambled after them to assign them to the grate. They were letters from his wife Jane—letters obviously written with a lined sheet underneath the very correct paper. Mr. Bobby read snatches here and there as he fed the flame.

"Jane and I certainly made an anti-climax combination," he murmured. Now, for him as well as for Jane—incompatibility spelled the merciful open sesame to the courts which dispensed freedom.

Mr. Bobby thrust the last letter into the fire, left his packing half finished, and went out for a walk.

"What a glorious wind!" cried Mr. Bobby, delightedly, as he felt the fresh sweep of the autumn gale upon his hot face. "Enough of it certainly ought to brace a man for what's next."

He walked briskly over the Truckee River bridge. In the blurred moonlight he could see only one other figure at the opposite end. It was a woman.

Mr. Bobby saw her half stop as the wind caught her skirts and wrapped them closely about her. Her long cape came unfastened and flapped against the iron grating. She stumbled—so strong was the force of the wind. Her arm went out as if to recover her balance. Mr. Bobby heard a quick sharp cry as something fell from her hand and splashed into the swift river below.

When Mr. Bobby reached her she was leaning over the railing peering into the river shadows.

"Did you drop it on purpose?" asked Mr. Bobby, tentatively.

When she turned Mr. Bobby observed, with due appreciation of the dramatic suggestion in the situation, that she was the new waitress.

"On purpose?"

Her voice throbbed with such a hopeless note that Mr. Bobby rushed to the railing and leaned over at a perilous angle to gaze after the lost article.

"I'm afraid it would be no use to dive for it," she said. "The river is so swift."

Mr. Bobby stood erect hastily, but when he caught the effect of her tear-dimmed eyes in the moonlight, he decided not to make the unnecessary admission that he had had no intention of diving.

"What is it you dropped?"

Mr. Bobby tried to keep the suspense out of his voice. She hesitated. It was a black moment for Mr. Bobby. He was certain that she was going to name some foolish bauble.

"It was my great-great-grandmother's jewel-case, with a little cloisonné vase inside."

"We will drag the river for it—or dive for it," exclaimed Mr. Bobby, greatly relieved to hear her mention something which had possibilities. "A jewel-box would probably go straight to the bottom without being carried along much by the current. I'll see to it the first thing in the morning for you."

"Oh, must I wait until morning?" she cried, quivering. "I'm afraid the fishes—"

"They aren't big enough to swallow it," Mr. Bobby assured her, soothingly.

But she was inconsolable—she leaned again over the railing and sighed despairingly. "Perhaps not—but—oh, it looks as if almost anything might be down there to steal it."

Mr. Bobby recklessly poised himself again at an uncertain angle.

"No, no!" she cried, putting out a restraining hand. "Please don't dive for it yourself—there may be some one about here who is a professional diver—some one who would be sure to get it."

"Perhaps—perhaps there is," answered Mr. Bobby, slowly, filled with mingled emotions as he looked wonderingly at this young woman who, with the air of one accustomed to the servility of the universe, took it for granted that a stranger would plunge into those cold whirling depths for her.

"Not that I don't appreciate your kindness," she went on hastily. "Only I must be sure to get it—"

"Oh, I understand—I quite understand," interrupted Mr. Bobby. "I'll see what I can do. As you say, there may be some one about here who is an expert diver."

He hurried off and returned shortly with one Arrow Jim, a Washoe Indian, who spent his summers doing extraordinary feats of diving for sated pleasure seekers at Catalina.

As Arrow Jim threw off his blanket and stood protectively only by his bathing-suit, Mr. Bobby gave an involuntary shiver.

"The water will be pretty cold for him, I'm afraid," he remarked.

"He doesn't need to stay in very long," she answered, comfortably snuggling herself in her warm cape and leaning forward eagerly.

Mr. Bobby closed his eyes an instant to fix the picture in his memory. It was perfect, he thought—absolutely perfect—her waiting attitude, her loosened



In a moment she knelt before her husband and thrust the Kiku vase into his hands.

bronze-gold hair blowing little gleams into the shadows which half obscured her face; Arrow Jim's slim figure poised ready for the plunge; the picturesque setting of the willow-sentinel river. Who could find in books a picture more satisfying?

A splash—a gurgle—a little chain of silent moments—then Arrow Jim's wet black head bobbed up like a water rat's. The two spectators above heard a guttural sound which announced his victory.

"I feel that I ought to let you know that you have helped me at a very crucial time," she said to Mr. Bobby as she clasped her dripping jewel-box. "A climax, in fact."

"Yes?" responded Mr. Bobby, bending an attentive ear while he gazed lingeringly at Arrow Jim's straight, blanketed figure disappearing in the moonlight, then at the willows bending sinuously in the wind.

"I am not really a waitress, you know," she went on. "Of course you know now I'm not, or I wouldn't have this jewel-box with a cloisonné vase inside."

"Of course not," answered Mr. Bobby, though he could not for the moment think of any reason why a waitress might not own the said articles.

"I am going to sell them to a curio-dealer. I've found out that there is one here some place. Do you know where?"

"Imado's place, you mean? Yes; I can take you there easily."

"Do you think he will buy these things?" Mr. Bobby caught the eagerness in her voice and answered buoyantly, "I'm sure he will."

Imado, the old collector, was nodding over some Hiroshige landscapes and dreaming of home when they entered. His sleepy eyes opened wide, however, when he saw the *kiku* vase.

He gave a soft exclamation of surprise.

"Where you get such piece as this?"

His tone bespoke recognition of the vase's value. He rubbed his fingers over the fine pumiced, rouged, and rape-oiled surface. His eyes lingered upon the fairy mosaic of sand-de-beuf and cream medallions which made a setting for the exquisite reed motif in dull amber, with an interweaving of delicate plum blows, tiny irises, and wee birds wing to wing.

Mr. Bobby glanced at his companion curiously as she hesitated. She did not seem prepared for the question.

"It was picked up in Japan several years ago, by a worshipper of cloisonné," she answered, finally. "Will you buy it?"

Then followed the bargaining. Imado said that he could not buy the vase, because it was worth more

than he could afford. But he would take it—yes, and the jewel-box, too, and offer them for sale the very next day. He would put them in the window. Doubtless some one would see them and buy soon.

Mr. Bobby mentally tagged his memory that he might not forget to set his alarm-clock.

As they walked out of the shop and along the streets Mr. Bobby found his companion very quiet. Curiously enough, the silence seemed a bond rather than a barrier between them.

"I hated to give it up—the little vase," she said, finally. "But there was no other way. I can't go on being a waitress; the proprietor told me to-night that he wants only trained waitresses. He says any one can see that I'm not used to it, and I'm too slow; I must leave when my week's up. So I had to sell these things; I brought them along for just such an emergency, for I didn't know whether I could get work or not, though I am willing to do almost anything."

She talked on, and then, somehow, she told Mr. Bobby her whole story. Her husband, Mr. Bobby learned, was Mr. Kent Vance, who had the largest private collection of cloisonné in the United States.

"I couldn't turn around without danger of knocking over a Namikawa vase or upsetting a Chinese tazzo," she confided. "Everywhere I looked I saw those long-tailed birds in plaques twisting their necks at me. The house was a regular cloisonné tomb. We couldn't have company, because they were careless about the cloisonné; we couldn't go out, because the cloisonné was too precious to leave. Why, I even dusted the cloisonné myself, because we never could get a maid who could be trusted with it. Cloisonné came first in the household. I went without clothes for it; why, my husband hasn't given me a check for a year! Sometimes I think he just forgets—he is very absent-minded—but I suppose it's because there's nothing left after he gratifies his thirst for cloisonné. That's why I can't live in residence here without selling the vase and the jewel-box. I took the vase out of a chest—it's been packed away there for months. It made me nervous to take it; I couldn't decide whether it was stealing or not. It was not like taking a piece that wasn't packed away. You see, the house is so full of cloisonné that my husband puts away many of his pieces—usually the imperfect ones or those he is tired of. When he put away the little *kiku* vase, I decided that I was no longer an essential part of his life."

He always said that this vase was a cloisonné presentment of me—he called it our love-vase. When he first met me I had on a pale-blue silk with irises in-

Mr. Bobby pondered, somewhat dazed by being thrust into the position of a casuist.

"Your husband said to you at the altar, 'With all my worldly goods I thee endow,' didn't he?" replied Mr. Bobby, finally, with some evasion.

"Yes, he said that, very distinctly."

"Then haven't you only taken him at his word?" Mrs. Vance bade Mr. Bobby good-night in a tone which gave him the smug sensation of being a comforter.

The next morning Mr. Bobby presented himself, money in hand, at Imado's shop to buy the *kiku* vase and the jewel-case.

"They're sold, snatched up right away, soon as I put in window," announced Imado.

"Sold?" gasped Mr. Bobby.

"Yes; just little while ago."

"You must have had to get up out of bed to wait on your customer?"

"Oh no; I get up sunrise," answered Imado, smiling, as he bowed Mr. Bobby out.

Mr. Bobby was unaccountably irritated because some one else had bought the things.

"Yet what does it matter, so long as she gets the money she needs?" he reasoned philosophically.

During that day he had no opportunity to speak to Mrs. Vance. Sometimes he thought he caught a half-humorous twinkle in her eyes as she served him at the table.

She did not appear the following day, and Mr. Bobby was thrown into a most uncertain state of mind. Later he received a note which read:

"MY DEAR MR. STANTON—I have gone home in answer to a telegram. I left so hastily that I did not get the opportunity to thank you again for your kind services, nor to inquire at Imado's shop about the purchaser of the *kiku* vase. I am most eager now to recover it. Though I repeat 'with all my worldly goods I thee endow' over and over, I somehow feel uncomfortable. Will you not inquire and let me know if you can get any trace of the vase?"

She closed with a cordial invitation to her home in San Francisco, and a repetition of her feeling of gratitude.

Mr. Bobby put down the note slowly.

"What was in the telegram?" he inquired of space. He had a short period of silent thought. . . . Certainly something which takes her back to an artistic climax. Yes, yes; she would never have gone otherwise, never. Of course she knew she was going back to her rightful position in the household."

He rushed out to Imado's to find out about the vase. Imado could tell him nothing. There was no reason for the customer's giving his name. So many people were in and out the shop, Imado really could not tell whether he had ever seen the man before or not—in fact, Mr. Bobby could gain no information which was of any consequence in recovering the vase.

Naturally enough, since they were best before and aft and bilaterally by cloisonné, the conversation soon turned to it.

"Let us have a look at the cloisonné in the Morvanian chest," suggested Mr. Vance, turning to his wife. "I want Mr. Stanton to see the little *kiku* vase—our love-vase."

Mrs. Vance looked at her husband with her eyes widening in naive distress. He put the key into his hand and led her as one dazed to the chest.

Then he flung himself upon a low couch and said, lightly, "Now I am the Shogun and you are one of the daimios bringing me gifts from Kasi. Let the first gift be the little *kiku*."

Mrs. Vance opened her lips to speak, then grew very pale as she mechanically unlocked the chest through half-shut eyes when she found the *kiku* was in its accustomed place.

"Kent!"

She gave a cry of astonishment as she looked at the vase, wondering. Then she slowly took it in her hands as if doubting its reality. In a moment she knelt before her husband and thrust the *kiku* vase into his hands.

"Here is the vase, Kent," she cried, "but some magic has brought it back to the chest, for I—I took it and sold it in Reno at Imado's."

"And I bought it at Imado's," he answered, laughing at her wide eyes.

"You were there?"

"Yes, I came originally to take you back with me. I arrived on the six-o'clock morning train. As I was passing Imado's window he was just putting in the vase. It didn't take me long to buy it, then I changed my mind; I didn't go on to the hotel for you; I turned around and got a train right back home. I took the vase with me instead of you. Then I sent the telegram. It was a test; I knew if you loved me you'd come; and now—now—the cloisonné may never be dusted, for all I care."

His husband caught her hands and kissed them triumphantly. He turned to Mr. Bobby with a half-apologetic air.

"You see, I have just had a revolution in my mind concerning certain values in life."

As Mr. Bobby looked benevolently at them, they seemed to be being enveloped in the golden mist of a beautiful awakening. There was that about their glances into each other's eyes which was as idyllic as those of first-confessed love.

"I knew it," he thought, "you would not have come back unless the telegram had called you to just such an artistic climax as this. . . . Every detail has been as beautiful—no more beautiful than anything inside of book covers."

Mrs. Vance smiled at him and answered, half-laughingly, "But you haven't seen the telegram."

"I don't need to see. Haven't all this proved what was in it? It would have been impossible for you to respond to an anti-climax. And the joy of this beautiful climax is that it's real. It has acted like a restorative to me. I had made up my mind that life was all a jumble of anti-climaxes. And just because of this little incident, Mrs. Vance, I am going to change my plans to go away from people."

Mrs. Vance looked at his lighted face, hesitated, then left her words unspoken.

Mr. Bobby went down the steps followed by the good-bys and well-wishes of the two people whose genuine happiness was as nectar to him. He lifted his face to the stars.

"After all, life is good!" he cried, exultantly. "Life is good!"

Then he paused to take out his pocket map. He ran his finger over it again—past the little black dot which indicated a mountain wilderness to a large metropolitan star.

"I want to be with people; at last—at last I am glad to be with people."

Once with his writing-pad again, he sat down and wrote joyously, swiftly, his mind full of poetical impressions as delicate as peach-blow.

Perhaps it was as well for Mr. Bobby that he did not read the telegram which, according to his view point, might not have fitted in the prettily artistic whole.

Tucked away in the little *kiku* vase for safe-keeping and laughing reference, Mrs. Vance keeps the telegram which brought her back to her husband.

There was silence again. . . . Just before they parted she turned to Mr. Bobby with one last question.

"Do you think that my taking the *kiku* vase was stealing?"

KENT VANCE

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